

Suppression in Sri Lankan society



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THERE was a news item in the media a few weeks back about a girl, namely Thilini Amalka, delivering a series of slaps to a young man at the Wariyapola bus stand. The incident was videoed and published on the web by a freelance journalist. This resulted in several web comments, especially by men, criticising Amalka's act, saying that she has done it excessively.

Subsequently she was arrested by the Police, produced before the Judicial Medical Officer to examine her mental condition and then produced before the magistrate. She was later released on Rs. 50,000 surety bail.

Her Attorney Lakshan Dias of Rights Now Collective for Democracy was of the view that the action taken by the Police was not correct and she was protected by Sections 345 and 346 of the Penal Code. Hence there would be a fundamental rights case against the Police by Amalka. He said that the young man made vulgar comments about her dress and then made obscene gestures.

By viewing the video it is clear that the young man was enjoying the slapping, which act suggested that firstly Amalka's claim about his sexual remarks and gestures would be true and secondly that he should be subjected to a medical examination and not Amalka.

Women face harassment daily

Women in this country face a similar situation and are harassed by men every day, especially in tightly-packed public transport system. In public places there are enough men who 'accidentally' touch bodies of women and hardly any woman raises her voice against this situation, mainly because of shame and fear.

One reason for this may be social suppression of sex which is eased by unorthodox ways such as this. Yet when one person rises and protests against this discriminative system, there are enough comments and much criticism, some in obscene language, against the girl who acted against the so-called authority of men. These male commentators were visibly shaken by the repeated slaps of the girl against the dominant male authority prevalent in the country today.

Sri Lankan women a discriminated lot

Women in Sri Lanka are a discriminated lot although they are the driving force of the highest income generation avenues to Sri Lanka – firstly, foreign remittances where the majority comes from Middle East housemaids; secondly, the apparel industry where factory floor workers are mainly girls coming from rural areas; and thirdly, the plantation industry where there are a lot of females working as tea

pluckers and rubber tappers, in addition to the household chores, which are not included in any economic calculation.

Although their contribution is high at the lower levels of economic activities, which brings volumes to national coffers, their contribution to the higher level decision making is very low compared to the percentage of their population and compared to the level of their education.

Most men would not agree to this fact of discrimination against women although it is evident but yet when someone uses force against it, there are several criticisms.

Racial discrimination

This is the situation against Tamils in Sri Lanka as well. When Tamils of Indian origin in plantations have voted with left parties in the first general election, their voting rights were removed against the provisions of safeguards of the Soulbury Constitution.

When Chelvanayakam staged a peaceful satyagraha campaign against the Sinhala only Act in 1956, he was booted away. When Amirthalingam became the Opposition Leader in 1977, Tamils in Colombo were attacked. When the 6th Amendment was introduced to the constitution in 1983, soon after the riots, Tamil parties had to withdraw from the Parliament. Finally when the LTTE came to the fore, operating

in far more excessive manner, they were destroyed.

Whenever there was a protest against discrimination and prevalent authority, whether it was peaceful or otherwise, it was crushed and no solution was given thereafter. However just like in Amalka's case there is lot of criticism and actions against the very actions opposing discrimination and authoritarian rule.

Religious discrimination

Christians in this country were privileged during colonial time and that status faded away gradually and the church started to integrate culturally with the rest of the society. However, there were several instances where the churches and temples of religious minorities were attacked and their religious activities were protested in the recent past.

A protest campaign was launched against the Muslims and they were systematically attacked in Aluthgama recently. Religious intolerance becomes evident in various ways in recent past.

Underprivileged discrimination

Poor in Sri Lanka are discriminated without any notice. Nowadays since national politics is centred on pseudo patriotism and show-off development, the poor of the country are affected. They are chased away from their inherited lands in the name of development.

The gap between the rich and the poor is widening whereas the policy makers focus on per capita income. This is the total income divided by the population which

does not reflect the unequal distribution of income. Gini coefficient is the indicator which measures income inequality where if it is 0 it is a perfect equal society and if it is 1 it is a perfect unequal society.

According to the available statistics, Sri Lanka's Gini coefficient in 2010 was 0.49 which was higher than India and Indonesia and was lower than Hong Kong. The dependence of direct taxes is low whereas there is heavy dependence of indirect taxes such as Value Added Tax.

In Sri Lanka the ratio of direct taxes to indirect taxes is around 20:80 where as it is around 55:45 in India. This means that the contribution of the rich to the national coffers is less and the same by the poor is more in Sri Lanka compared to India. In tax structure changes of the past years we saw that the import taxes of small cars and three wheelers were increased whereas the taxes of sports cars were decreased.

Caste-based discrimination

Although it is not prominently discussed and gradually fading away, the caste system in Sri Lanka still plays a discriminative role in the society.

Ranasinghe Premadasa was the only non-Govigama national leader produced by Sri Lanka. He was severely criticised and lot of barriers was created because of his caste. He came to the top as a result of sheer perseverance. The other leader who came close to Premadasa was C.P. De Silva who led the June 1960 election successfully and was deprived of the premiership mainly because of his caste.

This system was somewhat challenged by the rebellions the country faced. The leaders of three rebellions faced by Sri Lanka after the independence were spearheaded by non-Govigama and non-Vellala leaders and followers.

High suicide rate

Suicide rate in Sri Lanka is very high with 28.8 deaths for every 100,000 people according to the data of World Health Organization (WHO). According to the WHO, suicide victims are often from marginalised groups of the population and many of them are poor and vulnerable to a string of pressures.

In Sri Lanka, the suicide rate among younger age groups is higher compared to older age groups where the reverse is the case in developed countries. The country faced three rebellions after independence, where deaths on both sides were of the youth and it appears to be that the authorities and society have learnt no lesson except for President Premadasa who implemented certain recommendations of an appointed commission.

FT Quote

“In this intolerant nation, suppression can be exercised by men against women, Sinhalese against Tamils or Muslims, Buddhists against Christians or Hindus, higher castes against lower castes, the old against the young, people with power against the commoners and finally the rich against poor. If a nation wants to prosper economically, let alone the humanitarian aspect of social development, respect for all citizens irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, caste, age or gender should be prevalent and developed ahead of economic development. It is only then that economic development would be inclusive and sustainable and pave the way to distribute the benefits of development to the masses”

Power the main cause of oppression

Power is the main cause of oppression in Sri Lanka. Successive governments misused power and subjugated the powerless, which process has reached the zenith now with the virtual control of Executive, Legislature and Judiciary being in one hand. Ironically this is with the support of the oppressed.

The Leftists of this country tried to focus on the discrimination by haves against the have-nots. According to their view, the oppressed were the poor. In this intolerant nation, suppression can be exercised by men against women, Sinhalese against Tamils or Muslims, Buddhists against Christians or Hindus, higher castes against lower castes, the old against the young, people with power against the commoners and finally the rich against poor.

If a nation wants to prosper economically, let alone the humanitarian aspect of social development, respect for all citizens irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, caste, age or gender should be prevalent and developed ahead of economic development. It is only then that economic development would be inclusive and sustainable and pave the way to distribute the benefits of development to the masses.

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My View



Alternate Thinking

By Harsha Gunasena

UNIVERSITY teacher unions (FUTA and others) have long argued that the Government must at least contribute 6% of the GDP for higher education. It is indeed an important factor that has a direct bearing on long-term economic planning.

The Government of Sri Lanka must have development priorities to deal with certain requirements to attain the high growth rates. Long-term economic planning is an important aspect in taking the country to higher levels as global economic patterns keep changing and Sri Lanka should be ready to face the global economic challenges at any given time.

Unpredictable though the global trade trends may be; but if there is a population with certain skill sets, and if there are proper infrastructure in terms of R&D and human capital in higher educational institutes, it would not be an uphill task to face global challenges.

Global strategic considerations

One can now clearly see the global power politics involving India, Japan and China trying to make their presence felt in countries in an effort to meet the increasing challenges both in economic aspects as well as regional security cooperation. Vietnam is aligning itself with India.

The importance of Sri Lanka, its strategic location seems to have hit the front pages of global agendas. Geopolitical issues have seen some shifts in regional politics. India cemented a deal with Japan and Australia over civil nuclear collaboration.

The Prime Minister of Japan was in India and made a historical visit to Sri Lanka. Japan reiterated that it has some concerns over maritime security in India Ocean. The joint statement highlights 'Sri Lanka-Japan Dialogue on Maritime Security and Oceanic Issues in order to effectively address the issues of mutual interest in oceanic issues' and 'Prime

R&D factor in industrial development

Minister Abe expressed his gratitude to the Sri Lankan Government for the facilitation of the port calls by the vessels of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF).

Japanese business sector has expressed interest in investing in Sri Lanka. Does this not sound that there is a certain focus on Sri Lanka owing to changes in Asia Pacific balance of power?

Vietnam received highest FDI

Vietnam seems to have received the highest FDI, approximately \$ 6.8 billion during the first half of 2014. It would be pertinent to ask what really attracted Vietnam for foreign FDI, which Sri Lanka did not have. South Korea seems to have made the highest FDI in Vietnam. Why did foreign investors invest in Vietnam mostly in high-tech industries?

Vietnam spends 6.3% of GDP (World Bank, 2010) on education whereas Sri Lanka has spent only 2% of GDP (World Bank, 2010). Vietnam has received funding for science, technology and innovation by designing and piloting science, technology and innovation policies enhancing the effectiveness of Research and Development (R&D) institutions and encouraging the development of innovative technology enterprises.

The World Bank report says: "The projects (in Vietnam) main beneficiaries are R&D institutions and innovative technology enterprises that invest in R&D. Spin-offs and start up enterprises that are incubated from R&D institutions or universities, will also benefit. The project will also support the establishment of a private-public partnership research laboratory in the R&D zone of the Hoa Lac High-Tech Park."

A quick Google search would pro-

duce a delightful news item on high tech research in Sri Lanka that was about a raid by a Wildlife Department official over 'a high tech cannabis plantation' in the Yala reserve. A high tech investor would look into the R&D possibilities in the country in which investment is contemplated and whether investor could benefit from such infrastructure in place.

R&D in universities

Universities can play a pivotal role in economic development provided they are provided with the required facilities and staff are adequately motivated. There have been many university strikes in Sri Lanka and one would ponder whether our universities are really able to contribute to national economic development.

Have the universities been enlisted in national economic priorities? Have the university teachers been kept at a distance just because they demand 6% of GDP for higher education, thus creating an unhealthy work ambience? What are the current levels of R&D at our universities? Have they been adequately funded?

Have the research been properly identified so that research outcome would be beneficial for the industrialists who are struggling with product innovation in order to confront the global competition? What exactly is the level of participation between University academics and private sector institutions?

Does the University Act provide a space for such collaboration between Private and Public sector R&D ventures? Have there been constant dialogues between Chambers of Commerce and Industries with the R&D communities of the universities? In what way can the private sector participate in the 'production of knowledge' which is the cornerstone of industrial innovation?

Graduate education and research cannot be separated and each doctoral dissertation is produced under the supervision of senior university academics. The outcome of each research must produce some tangible results.

The science, engineering and medi-

cal faculties of universities must have a dialogue with corporate sector so that students and researchers can be provided with research topics that are hatched on the very factory/industrial hub where a certain manufacturing engineering problem is identified as being a matter for further research, a solution for which would provide a competitive edge for the product. The Medical Faculty could undertake research on a ground-breaking drug that can cure deadly diseases. The funding for such research could be from a private investor from abroad.

During the three-decade long brutal war with the LTTE, defence research was undertaken as a tool of necessity. This was so with other countries. The Cold War produced super technologies to meet the national security threats imposed by US and USSR on each other.

Sri Lanka is now experiencing the peace dividend and there has got to be a dialogue with universities and the private sector industries over R&D. The most important feature in a research academic is to possess the 'current' knowledge and in order to access 'current knowledge' an academic must have the academic freedom and the resources to access 'current knowledge'.

There has been a recent research by Prof. Rohan Munasinghe of the Department of Electronics, University of Moratuwa and was able to produce an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) with auto pilot and this was considered a novel innovation. In order for this project to take off the ground it must have the financial backing either from the

Government or from the private sector so that this research could reach another level. The Universities Act will have to be amended to provide space for such extensive collaboration. A private investor either locally or from overseas can be attracted for this UAV project.

The Ceylon Pencil Company has also collaborated with University of Moratuwa. Intellectual Property (IP) rights and transfer of such rights have to be within the legal framework whether this falls within the work of the individual academic or whether this right belong to the University are issues that needs to be incorporated into University Act on R&D matters. The checks and balances on the use and abuse of private funds for research and proper management of such funds should also be covered under University Act.

FT Quote

“It is extremely important to avoid duplication in R&D as there are Government institutions such as Industrial Development Board (IDB) and other Government institutions, hence better coordination among all research laboratories would obviate such duplication. There is a huge potential for economic development of our country if priorities are set right”

There are two types of knowledge: 'codified' and 'tacit'. Codified denotes that knowledge that can be written down and transferred with ease. Tacit knowledge cannot easily be transferred in written form and it requires frequent human interaction between academics and the corporate scientists.

Darby and Zucker (2003 cited in Kent H., 2006) have argued that "metamorphic" innovations such as those associated with the creation of new industries or the radical technological transformation of an existing industry, typically are driven by breakthrough discoveries in science and engineering.

Examples include integrated circuits, recombinant DNA, and nano-

technology. These kinds of discoveries are not well understood initially and cannot be codified. In the beginning, the new knowledge is largely tacit, and it is difficult for anyone other than the discoverer to see commercial value in the findings. Transfer and application to industry require benchmark relationships between industry scientists and the pioneering scientists".

The Silicon Valley in California is a best illustration of collaboration between U.S research academics and the corporate scientists and this has had a major impact on the local economic development. Some universities in US are deriving regular income from intellectual property patents and licensing and those funds have been redeployed for further research.

There has to be a major overhaul of the University Act, incorporating an administrative mechanism for research collaboration, which is required to promote a culture of collaboration between the private and public sector in R&D. Each university in Sri Lanka must have a publication unit commonly known as University Press.

A private entrepreneur may want to hire the laboratory of the university for tests as investing in a new laboratory would not sound viable. The academics can also be hired for short term consultancies and might have to report to the entrepreneur's facility for applied research. University Act is a major hurdle for economic development and must therefore undergo radical reforms in consultation with chambers of commerce and with other stakeholders. It is extremely important to avoid duplication in R&D as there are Government institutions such as Industrial Development Board (IDB) and other Government institutions, hence better coordination among all research laboratories would obviate such duplication. There is a huge potential for economic development of our country if priorities are set right.

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Guest Column



By Srinath Fernando